

GOT THAT RHYTHM

MAXEY BROOKE

Sweeny, Texas

Some talented performers, like Sid Caesar, can speak a series of nonsense syllables and, by varying the rhythm, make their audience think they are speaking French, Spanish, German, Italian, or Russian.

To American ears, Spanish sounds like birds twittering. To Mexican ears, English sounds like dogs barking.

Ancient Hindu scholars made a thorough study of Sanskrit rhythms but much of it is not readily available to western readers.

Whereas modern Occidental poetry depends upon rhyme, classical Greek and Latin poetry depended upon rhythm. To them, rhythm was not accent, but the length of time needed to pronounce a syllable. A syllable containing two consonants was long; one containing a short vowel followed by a single consonant was short. Honest, in Greek poetry, would be dum-DUM instead of DUM-dum.

To find something about rhythm patterns of English words, I checked the rhythm of the first word on each page of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (989 words). The rhythm patterns, the relative frequency of each pattern, an example of each pattern, and the Greek term for that pattern are tabulated below.

Pattern	Per Cent	Example	Greek Term
DA	17.00	boy	
DA-da	23.05	mantle	trochee
DA-DA	6.17	aardvark	spondee
da-DA	4.45	taboo	iamb
DA-da-da	13.25	hydroplane	dactyl
da-DA-da	9.00	iota	amphibrach
DA-da-DA	2.73	barleycorn	amphimacer
DA-DA-da	1.42	blackballer	antibacchius
da-DA-da-da	6.57	magnificence	ditrochee
DA-da-DA-da	5.16	gallimaufry	paeon
DA-da-da-da	1.11	citizeness	choriamb
DA-da-da-DA	0.51	dermatophyle	

DA-da-DA-da-da	2.33	braggadocio
da-DA-da-DA-da	1.11	depository
da-DA-da-da-da	0.91	hypothecation
DA-da-da-DA-da	0.51	meristematic
DA-da-da-da-da	0.21	anaphylaxis

The remaining 4.51 per cent of the words consisted of rarer patterns or six or more syllables.

Word rhythm is not the whole story. Sentence rhythm is also meaningful, as in

John said that
John said THAT

John SAID that
JOHN said that

All four sentences convey different shades of meaning.

The African jungle telegraph depends upon rhythm. It is not a code in the sense of our Morse code. The drummers beat out the rhythm of a well-known phrase containing the key word.

This is not as difficult as you might think. Try translating the following three rhythmic phrases, where increasing levels of intensity are denoted by da, da, DA and DA:

DA da-da-da-da da DA
DA da da da DA-DA-DA
da da da DA

The answers can be found in Answers and Solutions.